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Author: Kirk Newman

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Interviewee: Kirk Newman

Interviewer: Larry and Priscilla Massie

Attendees: Larry and Priscilla Massie, Kirk Newman

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Larry First of all, would you mind telling me something about your life prior to coming to Kalamazoo?

Kirk Let's see. I was in the Army Air Corps back in 1941. Right after I got out of school. About '42 I went in, I think.

Larry Right after Pearl Harbor.

Kirk I got out in '46, yes, and I was in training. I was going to be a bombardier. That was what I was training for.

Larry B17?

Kirk No, a big one they had down in New Mexico, getting ready to go get after the Japanese.

Larry Oh, okay.

Kirk B-29's I think. But I got out of there and immediately. I got out in January, but I enrolled in college right then.

Larry GI Bill, I take it?

Kirk Right then, yes, GI Bill.

PM Where'd you go to college?

Kirk University of Tulsa, which is a petroleum engineering school. But the government had gotten into building up art programs in universities and colleges, all over the country. I didn't know that, of course, at the time, but I realized that after I got into it. Some of the teachers I had, had been in the Army Air Corps, in fact. One of the best people I had there taught people how to fly. He was an instructor in the Army Air Corps. I went to school there for three or four years; I was in graduate school in Iowa in the summer. I ran into somebody, and I said, "I'll probably have

to look for a job one of these days.” He said, “Well, I know some people in Ann Arbor.” He called the University of Michigan and mentioned me. I got a letter from them about two days later, inviting me to come up for an interview with the head of the school of architecture and design.

So I went. They hired me within three or four minutes, I guess, because of the resume that I had. They were ready to hire me. My field was art education and they were setting up programs around Michigan. The first one they set up, I think, was in Grand Rapids. Following that immediately, the Kalamazoo Art Center at the time bought a program from the University of Michigan, and there were three of us, all with professorships, to come in and put up a program.

Larry In Kalamazoo?

Kirk In Kalamazoo. As I think back, that was so instrumental in getting the support we got after that, because these people were not just taking a little art class now and then. They were getting university quality art instruction. We had two professors from Grand Rapids who came down, and they were part of the program also. You could get credit in that program when we started it. It was a good, solid program. We got students all the time and it was kind of amazing. I think the University of Michigan had a lot to do with that, but those are the people that later on really hadn’t had art experience.

Larry The nucleus of the arts.

Kirk They were behind what we were going to do with our place.

Larry That’s how you landed in Kalamazoo. About what year is that?

Kirk 1949.

Larry ’49.

Kirk I had just gotten out of school. Actually, I went back and finished my Master’s degree. We did that for four or five years. Then the Gilmores, who were fairly helpful people here, decided they’d build an art place; they had Walt Disney here for the dedication.

Larry That’s great. When did you get into sculpture?

Kirk When I was in school I made all kinds of things. I probably made ten things to every student who made one. I just made a lot of stuff.

Larry Were they all bronze?

Kirk No, I didn't get into bronze until later, because bronze was a fairly new thing, a new old thing. I had a good friend at the University of Kansas who was doing a few programs, and trying to re-establish bronze casting. His name was Elden Tefft. The guys went down and brought him up here.

We built a foundry out in Richland. Had that for five years, and we had people all coming in; I built up a real understanding of bronze casting as it relates to art. In fact, here in Kalamazoo we have a really high quality bronze foundry going. We get business from Chicago and Detroit all the time. Life-size pieces. Hardly anyone realizes what we've got here.

Larry Where is it?

Kirk It's down on Park Street, about five or six blocks from here. It's in the Park Trades building.

Larry Oh, okay.

PM Is it part of your studio?

Kirk That's where my studio is, yes.

PM The whole casting is there and everything.

Kirk When I first started making big pieces, I hauled them over to Detroit. Some terrible adventures there.

PM Like the ones that are in the park, and things like that?

Kirk The ones in front of this building, for instance. Now, I just open the door and hand it to them.

Larry There you go. That's an amazing building there. So much going on.

PM I'd be so nervous about my piece, all the way to Detroit and back, yes.

Kirk Yes, I had some interesting experiences with that. I really appreciated having it [Ed. Note: The foundry.] close like that.

Larry Sure. When did you first become aware of Mr. Fetzer?

Kirk I met him through somebody that I knew from Bond Supply Company; and let's see, I think young Gilmore—

Larry Jim?

Kirk No, it's his son. He and his wife had some kind of a promotional business, and they knew John Fetzner.

Larry Oh, okay.

Kirk He had this idea to make these figures, or actually heads. I have a picture of all of them here.

Larry Yes, I've seen—

Kirk He came to my studio. Knocked on the door, and I looked out the door. I opened the door, and there was John Fetzner standing there. He wanted to have a few statues made.

Larry Do you know about what date that was?

Kirk I'd say three or four years before he died.

Larry Okay, so he died—late 80's.

Kirk Yes.

Larry And he sought you out.

Kirk Yes.

Larry He personally talked to you about constructing these? Did he ever talk to you about why he was picking those eight pieces?

Kirk Yes, we talked about a lot of stuff like that. He picked out the eight people he'd admired the most. Ramses, for instance, was one. The more we got into it, I thought, "Well, yes, we could do something. We'd probably have to research it a bit." We got funds for research, and I immediately went to the British Museum because they have the best Ramses ever there.

Larry That was the first piece you did, Ramses?

Kirk I kind of did them all. Yes, I don't remember which one I did first. You've seen this catalog?

Larry Yes, I have. Yes, that's excellent. That's a good interview.

Kirk It kind of explains everything.

Larry Sure.

PM Did you do his portrait before you did the bronzes, because you had mentioned to me you did John's portrait also?

Kirk I think I did it afterwards.

PM After the bronzes, okay.

Kirk Yes, I remember about it now. His wife was quite sick. In fact, I think she died during that period.

Larry Rhea.

Kirk Rhea, yes. See, there he is.

Larry Sure. Oh, you did him, too. Okay, I haven't seen that one. Maybe they've got it down there. You did him after the bronzes?

Kirk I think so.

Larry Did he work with you in understanding these people, giving you information about these eight people?

Kirk Not a whole lot. He just had this idea that he wanted these; he thought they were probably among the eight most important people in our history so far. I guess that was his approach.

Larry Did he ever talk to you about his personal, spiritual beliefs?

Kirk I asked him, yes.

Larry Did you?

Kirk We had a conversation.

Larry Can you remember what he told you?

Kirk I don't remember a whole lot, other than one specific thing. I said, "Have you always been satisfied with your business deals?" We had a pretty good—

Larry Yes, yes.

Kirk He said, "I never made a deal that wouldn't have passed." I don't know whether he said Jesus or the Christian thing. I don't remember that specifically. I think he said Jesus. The whole idea was that that was in his mind all the time.

Larry He was a very astute businessman, but then he had another side that he didn't reveal to a lot of people; that was his interest in, you might call it, esoteric types of spirituality.

Kirk Yes, I had a little bit of conversation with him about that.

Larry Yes, you can't be sure about these things, but there's good evidence that he believed in reincarnation.

Kirk Yes.

Larry There's one school of thought that believes John Fetzer thought that he had been these people in the past. Did he ever discuss that?

Kirk Had been these people?

Larry Had been these people. Had been reincarnated.

Kirk I never heard that, no.

Larry That's interesting.

Kirk Right after I agreed to do all this, I said, "We've got to go here and there." In fact, I went to Monticello, because half of this up here—

PM Is designed like Monticello.

Kirk It's a whole circular ring. He made that point with me, what could we do? I said, "It seems pretty simple. You just pick out these eight figures, and we'll put them around there.

PM It's beautiful.

Kirk I don't think that's out there in the building anymore, though.

Larry Jefferson is. I think they may have scattered them around different. They don't have it as a unit anymore.

PM Because they also have Gilchrist, a big place out in Three Rivers; and there are other locations; I think they might be scattered around. I'm not really sure.

Kirk They look pretty good this way.

PM They do, they do.

Kirk They changed the building a lot, and the people that followed him, whoever was in charge, completely changed the atmosphere and everything.

Larry You mentioned in the interview that was included in this book that you thought that, over the years, people having contact with these various sculptures, perhaps even touching them, would bring more power eventually.

Kirk To them?

Larry To the whole unit of things.

Kirk Yes, I think they do grow like that. It's a strange attitude but—

Larry No, it isn't.

Kirk I've had that experience myself. I was going to tell you about one little experience I had. I knew I was going to go to Monticello and examine that. As I drove in the drive, I noticed a number of forms sticking up that was obviously the graveyard. The one I could see first was Kirk, my name; I related that to John, and we both got a chuckle out of that.

"See how it works," that was his attitude. I must say I have read everything that Jefferson's [written]—most of the things I get to. I really understand what that was all about, the early part of developing our culture and our system of government; it was such a big deal in the world. It never happened before, that man could be that free and run himself, manage his own affairs.

Larry Jefferson had his own unique spirituality, with that Bible that he came up with.

Kirk Yes, kept the things he thought were important and never mind the rest of them.

Larry Did you ever discuss that with John, the Jefferson Bible?

Kirk No, no. I feel like I got more from not saying too much. We didn't have any long discussions. In fact, when we started to do this, he said, "I won't pose." I said, "Okay." He said, "I'll just go ahead and work, and you can do what..." It would have been a lot easier if he didn't mind posing a little bit, but I understood; it's not the greatest thing I ever made, but I think I got a lot of his spirit into it.

PM Oh, I think you captured it.

Kirk That doesn't look too bad there.

PM That's wonderful.

Kirk I wasn't 100 percent with it, but the whole experience was—

PM Did he come to your studio when you did that?

Kirk No, I went to his house, and that was fine with me. Made a good set-up.

PM Sure, sure.

Larry Do you know anything about that hologram that's out there?

Kirk No.

Larry It's at the entrance. It's a tall structure that—

Kirk No, I don't understand it. I mean, I don't know about it.

Larry It has a spiritual influence, too. It was executed by a man, an artist down in Austin, Vincent Mariani. I talked to him; it was originally conceived to emit a hologram image, but it never quite functioned like that. I just wondered if that had ever—

Kirk No, I didn't—

Larry Did you attend any [events], like the unveiling of the building or anything?

Kirk Yes, I guess so. Yes, I remember that whole thing now, because he had busses to take people out there.

Larry Right, yes.

Kirk That was my one visit to the place. I don't know if we had this up; we must have had this done by then.

Larry Yes, I think this book was done in 1988, so it would have been prior to that that they were in place.

Kirk Who wrote this? Did I say this?

Larry You were interviewed in the back here.

PM It's so wonderful.

Larry It really is a nice—let's see.

Kirk I got a good photograph.

Larry You sure did. This is where they interviewed you.

PM Oh, it's a beautiful book. It really shows your work.

Kirk Well, thank you.

Larry But you've done so much.

Kirk I've been so busy over the years, yes.

Larry There's a website that talks about your work, and there's a map of Michigan that shows all the different cities where your work is. Did you know that?

Kirk I don't think I've seen that one. I'll probably see it.

Larry There's one in Grand Rapids, I think, and all over, Douglas, over by Saugatuck.

Kirk I have some work over there.

Larry Yes, yes.

Kirk Can't remember right. Douglas? I don't think I have anything in Douglas.

Larry It showed that on the map.

Kirk I have a gallery over there, though.

Larry Oh, maybe that's—

PM Oh, do you have a gallery over there?

Kirk Yes.

PM Oh, okay, that's our neck of the woods. It's about ten minutes from us.

Kirk It's not in Saugatuck. It's in that little town, Douglas.

PM Oh, Douglas, yes.

Kirk It's the best art gallery over there, and they have some of my work. She's able—

Larry Was that the Petter gallery?

Kirk No, not Petter. I would never give her my work; and she could never understand why not.

PM We understand.

Larry Yes, we do.

PM We understand there are a lot of artists with that attitude.

Kirk Steven Hanson. I don't know if you know who Steven Hanson is or not.

PM I've heard that name, yes. Is that his gallery that you have your—

Kirk He had worked with her briefly, and I doubt she treated him so terribly. At that time he was my son-in-law, and I was thinking, "She's getting a bad deal."

Larry Other artists have said the same thing. She takes a big percentage.

PM Yes, we've had so many friends tell us that, that it's too bad.

Kirk That's the way she is.

PM What gallery are you in over in Douglas?

Kirk What is her name? Maryjo Lemanski is the director, and it's just one big gallery there; if you go in, it's worth a visit there. I think she's got a nice set-up.

Larry When you'd finished these, did John say anything to you that he liked them?

Kirk You mean like, "Great job!"?

Larry Yes.

Kirk No, he didn't, but I think he was very pleased.

PM Was he pleased? Would he come in and see them individually, or see the progress or anything?

Kirk No, he understood how you do it. He came one other time and didn't have much to say. Said, "Hmm, mmm," and he left. He could see what was going on.

Larry Sure.

Kirk I got deep into this because I had always had a big interest in history, man's thoughts, and the place of art in it all, which is really strange.

Larry Did you think those were good choices, those eight, as far as influence on thinking and humanity?

Kirk I don't think I could have disagreed, with what I know. I didn't know a whole lot about every one of them. I learned a lot more about Egyptian art—it's endless. What they accomplished was so incredible; but—the world changed so much.

Larry How they did it - people still don't know, do they?

Kirk No, no. Big mystery.

Larry John was very interested in the pyramids and the potential power of pyramids. Did you know that?

Kirk No, I'm not surprised, though. I can understand how his mind was working a little bit.

Larry He liked the power of crystals. At one time there were a lot of crystals out there, huge crystals.

Kirk Oh, I didn't know that.

Larry And things like that, but he was a very special person.

Kirk I'll say. You've got a pretty good subject here.

Larry Yes, we do.

Kirk You could go in all kinds of directions with it.

PM We have been, yes.

Larry Yes, we've interviewed quite a few people. It's important to get this preserved because, talking to you, we're getting some information that is never in the textual record prior to this. That's the value of oral history.

PM Why did John decide on busts over full figures, or over paintings, or sculpture? Did he talk to you about any of that?

Kirk I think it's because probably the mind—is the mind thing and—

PM That's our computer.

Kirk That's the main part. We're made up of an incredible number of parts but yes, what do we know? We don't know much.

Larry We go forward a little and then go back a little.

Kirk You can only know what you can know when you can know it.

PM That's true.

Kirk You can't be too sure of it.

Larry You've been a profound influence on Kalamazoo, the art.

Kirk Oh, well thank you.

Larry That's why we were so pleased to be able to talk to you.

Kirk It's been kind of interesting here; actually, it was a really good thing for me. I could have left a number of times, but we were making something here, and it was kind of fun.

PM You certainly have.

Larry I was telling the librarian, Kalamazoo is the kind of place that if you have something to offer, you'll be embraced by the community; as opposed to some cities, where you've got to be third, fourth generation. Do you know what I mean? I felt that when I came to Kalamazoo, and I think you probably did, too.

Kirk I always, somehow, had plenty of help and encouragement. That was nice. I never wanted to run anything exactly, because that's another kind of pressure you don't need, but I like to see things get done.

Larry Yes, I'm the same way. I'm not an administrator.

Kirk No, no. The minute you do that, you've got all these other people's problems.

Larry Yes.

PM I have a question for you. When you were doing all the sculptures, how long did it take you to do? Was it over a year that these were done?

Kirk Oh, I probably had, I'd say, about a year and a half, but you know—

PM I love that one.

Kirk I learned a ton. You'll see this in—

PM Louis XIV.

Kirk Where he was. I think this one is in Paris.

Larry Versailles?

Kirk Versailles, yes. His history is quite - all these guys' histories are incredible.

PM Oh, just incredible; and the sculptures - they come to life. I love that one. I love them all.

Kirk Boy, reading the history of this guy always really got me, St. John of the Cross. Such a terrible time. Being held underground.

Larry Very mystical.

Kirk That was a terrible period.

Larry You sure captured him, and it must have been hard because—

Kirk It's funny to look back on these. I haven't looked at these in a long time.

Larry Because there are no real images of many of these, are there, that you could go with?

Kirk No.

Larry You had to—

Kirk When I was working on Ramses, there are so many different heads of Ramses. There are all kinds to choose from, and you end up making it a composite in a way. And Socrates is something else. If you've read much Socrates, you know you don't mess with that.

PM That's true.

Kirk But this was the brains right here. This guy, Jefferson.

Larry Yes, he was.

PM He was amazing.

Larry Now that Kirk tombstone you saw, was that one of his children?

Kirk No, I just saw the K-I-R-K on this big thing over a grave. I was wondering, "Who in the world was that Kirk that was part of that time? And why is it in this little cemetery behind the building?" My grandfather's name was Kirk, and he moved when the Civil War was ended, had to get out and find another place to plant cotton without hiring black people. He ended up continuing to move into Arkansas. He set up a store there, but he also had established a trading post in Oklahoma, which was still Indian territory.

Larry Sure it was.

Kirk When they opened it up [Oklahoma Territory], he was all set because he had already established himself there. He moved into a small [town] named Idabel, in southern Oklahoma, down the Red River, and he had quite a nice life there. He bought all the stuff that farmers needed, including horses and teams and all that kind of stuff. As I think about it, he had a big time building all that stuff.

PM Was he originally in Virginia?

Kirk No, Alabama.

Larry You were named after him?

Kirk I guess so.

Larry But did you find out who that Kirk Jefferson was?

Kirk I haven't done it yet. It's in the back of my mind. I wonder who that was, and what relationship he might have had with that situation.

Larry You need to go back there, I think.

Kirk I've been a couple of times, but I haven't pursued that.

Larry John was very much into genealogy. He wrote two books about his own genealogy, and traveled to Europe and did research. He never talked to you about that, did he?

Kirk No, but I had thought about stuff like that a lot. We're all such a compilation of genes from everywhere, and if you think you can pick out a couple somewhere in the past and hey, that's it. That's kind of hard.

Larry Yes, it is.

Kirk The whole world is changing so fast in that regard.

PM It really is.

Kirk Soon we're going to all look alike. It may take a while.

Larry We've got a couple of daughters, red-headed daughters, and they look a lot alike. We have trouble sometimes looking at their baby pictures, figuring out who's who, but they are so different.

Kirk Little packets of genes are not the same.

Larry They are so different. They are just night and day.

Kirk You can sure see it.

Larry This has been a very good. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to us.

Kirk Glad to meet you, and thank you.

PM Thank you so much.

Kirk I think you're going to have a real challenge here.

PM It's such an honor for me, that you even came and did this. It really is. I thank you, seriously.